

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA



A39001031560405B

RETURN TO REFERENCE LIBRARY

**COLLEGE
OF
ARCHITECTURE**



UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

DATE 11-64

MASTERS OF ARCHITECTURE
SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

Under the General Editorship of Stanley C. Ramsey



CASTLE HOWARD. GARDEN FRONT.

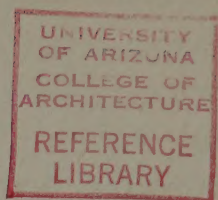
SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

BY CHRISTIAN BARMAN

WITH 34 ILLUSTRATIONS
FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY
F. R. YERBURY

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1924

PRINTED AND MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN



NA 9977
.V3
B3
1920

LIST OF PLATES

CASTLE HOWARD. GARDEN FRONT. *Frontispiece.*

1. BLENHEIM. VIEW FROM THE SOUTH-WEST.
2. BLENHEIM. ENTRANCE FRONT.
3. BLENHEIM. MAIN ENTRANCE.
4. BLENHEIM. GARDEN FRONT.
5. BLENHEIM. DETAIL OF COLONNADE. ENTRANCE FRONT.
6. BLENHEIM. DETAIL OF ENTRANCE FRONT.
7. BLENHEIM. BRIDGE IN PARK.
8. BLENHEIM. DETAIL OF INNER COURTYARD.
9. BLENHEIM. DETAIL OF ENTRANCE FRONT.
10. BLENHEIM. ENTRANCE TO COURTYARD.
11. BLENHEIM. LIBRARY.
12. BLENHEIM. THE CORRIDOR.
13. BLENHEIM. DOORWAY IN LIBRARY.
14. BLENHEIM. MAIN STAIRCASE.
15. BLENHEIM. VIEW OF GREAT HALL.
16. BLENHEIM. THE GREAT HALL.
17. SEATON DELAVAL. MAIN FRONT.
18. SEATON DELAVAL. GENERAL VIEW.
19. GREENWICH HOSPITAL. ADDITION BY VANBRUGH.
20. GREENWICH HOSPITAL. DETAIL.
21. GREENWICH HOSPITAL. DETAIL.
22. VANBRUGH CASTLE. BLACKHEATH.
23. (a) DUNCOMBE PARK.
(b) DUNCOMBE PARK. THE STABLES.
24. CASTLE HOWARD. GENERAL VIEW FROM THE GARDENS.

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

25. CASTLE HOWARD. DETAIL OF WING.
26. CASTLE HOWARD. GENERAL VIEW.
27. CASTLE HOWARD. THE PAVILION.
28. CASTLE HOWARD. BRIDGE IN GROUNDS.
29. CASTLE HOWARD. DETAIL OF ENTRANCE FRONT.
30. CASTLE HOWARD. VIEW FROM THE STAIRCASE LOOKING INTO THE
GREAT HALL.
31. CASTLE HOWARD. FIREPLACE IN GREAT HALL.
32. CASTLE HOWARD. THE GREAT HALL.
33. CASTLE HOWARD. THE CORRIDOR.

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

BY CHRISTIAN BARMAN

THE Muse of History, it has often been observed, manifests a clear desire to single out the most remarkable of her subjects by concealing their personal life beneath an impenetrable shadow, against which their strength or greatness of character, the particular quality of their accomplishment, becomes the more singly, emphatically discernible. If such obscurity is really a criterion of genius, then Sir John Vanbrugh's claim upon our homage is indeed well founded. Of the first half of his life we know little except that he paid France a visit which may have lasted a couple of years, and in the course of which he seems to have been clapped into the Bastille—upon no weightier charge, let me hasten to add, than that preferred against the average political prisoner in a singularly troubled age. From the interval that precedes the appearance (it might almost be called an explosion) of *The Relapse* at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane we can gather nothing except one or two facts of small importance. What are we to say about the much more alluring darkness that enshrouds the next transitional point—the point where his two careers, the old one of dramatist and the other with which I am here principally concerned, are mysteriously known to intersect? We only know that in the year 1703 Vanbrugh had turned his attention to architecture; but before he definitely

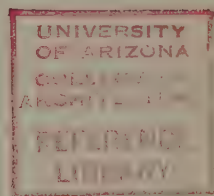
SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

embraced the profession by which he is chiefly remembered he spent several more years dallying with a form of activity that perhaps lies somewhere vaguely between the two others. It is possible that the designing of the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket (the site for which he acquired in 1703 at the cost of £2000), may have launched him on his architectural career: it is evident that he set about the building of it because of a sudden decision to do what a living novelist has recently done with conspicuous success—to try, that is, his hand at operatic management. His work in this direction, far from being entirely fruitless, must have contributed not a little to the instant success enjoyed by Handel's production of *Rinaldo and Armida* in this country, for without the distinguished Italian singers brought over shortly before by Vanbrugh the performance could not have made the impression it did. Not only, therefore, must he be looked upon as the founder of the greatest amusement centre in the world—the Queen's Theatre was the first playhouse to be erected in the West End of London, and indeed for some time remained much handicapped by the comparative remoteness of that quarter—but it is to his personal activity as a manager that the establishment of Italian Opera in England must be ascribed. And yet, to a man who had won for himself a conspicuous position in the literary world, and who was about to distinguish himself yet more highly in the architectural, such

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

a brief interlude, however productive, must have been rather in the nature of a relaxation, a breathing-space, affording, we may hazard, a welcome opportunity to prepare himself for a more signal enterprise.

I do not propose to put forward any conjectures regarding the architectural training to which Vanbrugh had, or had not, in his time been subjected. His plays (of which little need be said) are perhaps the most amazing products of untutored genius in the English language: it is their freedom from any literary flavour whatsoever that makes them utterly unlike those of any of his contemporaries. We shall not be far amiss if we put down the peculiar qualities of his architecture to a similar—one dares hardly call it a deficiency—a similar innocence of learning and of the discipline of learning. We may, if we like, take Swift's word for it when he says that the new profession was entered upon "without thought or lecture." It is true that Vanbrugh did his best in a way to acquire by himself the rudiments of classical doctrine. He had for some reason been made Comptroller of the Royal Works under old Sir Christopher Wren in 1702, and in the following year, when he was close upon forty years of age, he is for the first time recorded to have made the purchase of an architectural book. It was a copy of the French Palladio; and when Leoni's English edition is issued a little later we shall find him once more among the subscribers. He appears, however, to have taken but a



SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

superficial interest in the more elementary part of the work; the great Italian country houses with their fine ambitious planning are much more likely to have held his attention. Castle Howard, upon which he was engaged at the time, is proof enough that they did: it is also proof that he cared no more about delicacy and correctness of finish than he did when he dashed off those easy reckless comedies in his soldiering days.

What other architect—what creative artist in any medium—has opened his career with such a spectacular plunge as this? For if Castle Howard is not Vanbrugh's *magnum opus* itself, if it was shortly to be superseded by the matchless amplitude of Blenheim, it forms, at any rate—together with the Queen's Theatre, of whose merits and acoustical shortcomings we know only by hearsay—a beginning which we shall be hard put to parallel. Many lesser tasks were to be entrusted to Vanbrugh in after years; his was often enough to be the difficult and inglorious business of altering and patching up existing structures of mediocre interest: but if any such preceded the inception of his two great masterpieces it still awaits the inquiring glance of modern research. What must surprise us, therefore, in this truly astonishing performance is not the fact that it is less assured in its expression than some of Vanbrugh's later work, but rather that it already exhibits the peculiar complexion of his genius in an equally unmistakable manner, though perhaps in a lesser degree of

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

concentration. Such instant maturity must be deemed incredible but for the reflection that genius itself is in its essence without precedent, and therefore consistently incredible. Wren's early buildings might have been designed by anyone; few of the works of Vanbrugh's contemporaries and immediate successors bear any overwhelming intrinsic evidence of their authorship; Castle Howard and Blenheim, however, could only have been invented by one man, a man capable of bold and powerful—perhaps too bold and too powerful—flights of imagination; a man with little love of the exquisite or the scholarly, but with a fund of native invention far in excess of that of his contemporaries; a man who would have steered towards the Charybdis of looseness and redundancy rather than fall a prey to the Scylla of polite and accomplished boredom; a man, in short, whose characteristics we should find it immensely difficult to disentangle from those of Sir John Vanbrugh himself as we have learnt to know them.

In the very year which saw the opening of the Queen's Theatre, Vanbrugh laid the foundation-stone of the great Palace at Woodstock. He little guessed how the source of perpetual anxiety which he was releasing that moment would continue to complicate and embitter his life till within a couple of years of its termination, when, on the eve of the completion of that remarkable edifice, he was summarily dismissed from his appointment. We shall probably come

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

very close to the true explanation of the long series of difficulties, interruptions and undignified quarrels which accompanied the building of Blenheim from beginning to end by admitting that, in appearance at least, it was at no time perfectly and immovably established at whose instance the work was undertaken. But if it is possible that we may never know to a certainty even what steps the Duke of Marlborough took that led towards this magnificent act of national gratitude, we are, at any rate, left in no doubt with whom the idea originated. We may attach the fullest credence to Vanbrugh's deposition on oath that "in 1704 the Duke met him and told him he designed to build a house," especially as it is quoted in a document which puts the case for the other side. Though the idea came from Marlborough, however, it was clearly the latter's intention all the while that he should, if possible, receive his new mansion as a gift. "He would have any Estate bought," writes the Duchess in one of her letters, "that his Friends thought a good purchase, but . . . it was natural for him to prefer any purchase in Oxfordshire or Hertfordshire before any other." It was eventually the Queen herself who, as we know, gave the grounds at Woodstock and ordered the preparation of the designs of which Parliament was shortly afterwards to ratify the execution. Prepared they were; and what designs they must have been! For such, we are told, was the Queen's admiration for them that she

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

had them placed in her Palace at Kensington, where she could feast her eyes upon them daily. But no sooner had the work commenced than trouble set in. The first stone was laid in the early summer ; at the end of October the masonry was cracking in the frost, and the foundations, which were coming to pieces, had to be taken up and built again. "'Tis look'd upon," says a contemporary writer, "as a bad omen" ; but whatever may have been the prophetic significance of the incident, it was not by such reverses of building only that Vanbrugh was to be pursued. The work had been going on for but eighteen months or so when payments began to be withheld by the Government. "There is so much money required for public good this year," we find our unfortunate architect confiding to the Earl of Manchester about this time, "that my Lord Treasurer can't afford us at Blenheim half we want." A third and far more considerable calamity was to swoop down upon him in the person of the notorious Duchess herself, popularly known as Queen Sarah.

The eagle eye of this redoubtable woman soon enough caught her architect in mischief, and was to catch him again and again till the end of his life. To begin with, Vanbrugh—with the true innovator's respect for antiquity—was anxious to preserve the old manor of the place. If, as he has alleged, the £3000 spent on its restoration came out of his private purse, its destruction by the Duchess, who had the neighbouring roads repaired with the stones, will give us something

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

of an index of her highly composite character. It may be doubted whether a more unhappy mixture of avarice and evil temper has ever been met with in history; and Pope's satirical poem, when it says of her that no passion of hers was gratified except her rage, may perhaps justly be suspected of omitting the least savoury half of the truth. It is related of this engaging person that during the first year of the building at Blenheim she revived—with regrettable insuccess—the horse-race instituted there by her predecessor. The following year the plate was carried off by Lord Kingston's horse, which was the only one to run; and the disappointed Duchess endeavoured in vain to retrieve the plate from one whom in her spleen she described as "a most rank Whig." It is with similar feelings that she must have watched Vanbrugh's determined efforts to complete the great palace, the idea of which was doubtless in large measure her own, and watched him with the full knowledge that whether she herself or the Queen paid for the work was a matter of little consequence to him. It is impossible not to believe that had she and the Duke had their way the building would have been interrupted or curtailed according to the payments made by the Government, and that, had it not been for Vanbrugh's inflexible determination alone, we should not to-day possess Blenheim in its marvellous completion. The Duchess did not conceal her discouragement. "As the Building will never be finished," she writes, "it can never be any Advantage

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

or Pleasure to my Lord Marlborough or his Family, but will remain now as a Monument of Ingratitude, instead of what was once intended." Did she reckon without Vanbrugh, who in 1707 wrote that "two more summers will finish it"? She cannot have been unaware of his ambition, and was of one mind with the Duke that it must not be allowed to flourish at their expense; though at first, when the sumptuary vagaries of the Government had not yet assumed alarming proportions, she could be appreciative enough. "My Lady Duchess was there lately," writes Vanbrugh of Blenheim under the same date, "and returned to Windsor so entirely pleased, that she told me she should live to beg my pardon for ever having quarrelled with me. I find," he goes on to say (and we can well understand his desire to test her sincerity), "she declares the same thing to the Lord Treasurer and to everybody."

Her satisfaction did not last long. "I agree entirely with you that Mr Vanbrugh must be carefully observed," writes the Duke from abroad to his wife in 1709, "and not suffered to begin any new work; but to apply all the money to the finishing what I directed before I left England." And within ten days: "I find you are apprehensive that Mr Vanbrugh gives me false accounts of what passes at the building at Woodstock. I do assure you, upon my word, that *I have neither received any accounts or any letter from him* since I left England." So much for the Duchess'

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

suspensions: is it too much to ask whether they were real ones? But her husband fortunately places greater trust in her than she in Vanbrugh. "I approve," he continues, "of all you have done," and repeats his caution: "I believe you can't be too careful of hindering Vanbrugh from beginning new foundations." They were not, it is evident, to be led into any fresh extension of the work for which the Government showed so little anxiety to provide. It is true that ominous circumstances were causing that benevolent feeling to dwindle from day to day. On Good Friday of the year 1710 the relations between the Duchess and the Queen, which had been growing cooler for some little time, were broken off at an interview which can only be described as tempestuous; and a few months later the infuriated Duchess, who was just about to become the Queen's neighbour in Pall Mall, quitted her apartments in St James's, taking with her the locks from the doors and the whole of the marble chimney-piece. "The Queen is so angry," her confidential secretary informs her a little later, "that she says she will build no house for the Duke of Marlborough when the Duchess has pulled hers to pieces." Her Majesty apparently thought better of it, however, for in August of the following year Swift notes in his *Journal to Stella* that she has "ordered twenty thousand pounds to go on with the building at Blenheim, which has been starved till now, since the change of the ministry." But no more assistance was to be extended to Vanbrugh

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

during the next three years. A little later the Duke of Marlborough (who, it was found, had been paid £6000 annually by a Jew for the privilege of supplying the army with bread) was dismissed from all his appointments and left the country, to which he was to return only on the accession of the new king. A few months after his departure the building at Blenheim was stopped at the Queen's command. It must now have appeared doubtful indeed whether anything more would come of it; and the disheartened Vanbrugh complains of the galling injustice and futility of the whole affair in a letter to the Mayor of Woodstock, which is the cause of his dismissal, early in 1713, from his post in the Board of Works.

The opening of the new reign was suddenly, dramatically auspicious. "The first knight that King George made," says Thomas Hearne, the Oxford scholar, "is one Vanbrugh, a silly fellow, who is the architect of Woodstock." For a short while it looked as if all would be righted. The new Government had allocated half a million for the liquidation of the late Queen's debts, and proceeded at once to pay them off. When it came to the arrears due to the builders at Blenheim, however, £16,000 was thought sufficient to cover an indebtedness of £50,000; and the whole business having been settled by such summary methods, it was forthwith decided that no more money would be laid out on it in future. An admirable solution! The workmen, of course,

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

immediately struck, and if poor Vanbrugh had seen the completion of his masterpiece threatened before, he can never—it will be said—have lost hope so completely as he undoubtedly did (who would not?) at this moment. Was Blenheim to remain but a fragment after all? We know that part of the great Gallery was still uncovered in 1717. But this dark hour was to show our unwearying architect at the height of his mettle. In 1705, while the responsibility for the great building still had to be definitely assumed by the Crown, he had, during one of the Duke of Marlborough's absences abroad, obtained from Lord Godolphin a warrant appointing him surveyor, with power to contract on behalf of the Duke. The latter was rich—fabulously rich—and why should he not, when it came to the worst, be called upon to pay for the palace he was himself to inhabit? But the warrant was instantly disowned by Marlborough, who with some vehemence denied he had ever heard of it. The rest of the dismal story is nothing but a record of protracted and obstinate litigation. The Duchess soon sought her revenge upon Vanbrugh for his attempt to evade the financial responsibility of the work with which he had so long been associated; and when, in 1718, two contractors sued for a considerable sum, she tried her utmost to charge him with the liability. This time, however, Godolphin's warrant afforded more effectual protection. As for the Duchess, she appears to have decided that she and Marlborough, at any rate, were not the persons to

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

pay for their palace; and the case of the two contractors lingered on until the Barons of the Exchequer pronounced judgment against her three years later—not, however, before she had again made repeated attempts to divert the burden upon her hapless architect. At last the Duke died, and the acrimonious Sarah was free to do her worst. But there was an increased acrimony on the other side too, for the true extent of Marlborough's wealth, now revealed, had astonished everyone. It is easy to surmise what Vanbrugh's reflections must have been (there are hints of them in his correspondence) upon discovering with what little justification his great work had been interrupted again and again—nay, how gratuitous was the Duchess' attempt to leave unpaid his own services, now extending over close upon twenty years, and to obtain an injunction against him in Chancery—it is scarcely credible—by proving that he had never been formally employed by the Duke. That was in 1725, the year before his death; a twelvemonth earlier she had managed to dismiss him from his position of architect. It is pleasant to learn that she was frustrated at least upon one occasion; but Walpole's intervention was required before the long-standing fees were finally paid. A last terrible insult awaited Vanbrugh—still the object of her insatiable ardour of malice—who, together with his wife, arrived one day at Woodstock with a party of friends, when he was peremptorily refused admission to the grounds of the palace. He clearly did not then, and cannot

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

very well since, have witnessed much of the progress made with the building during the last few years of his life. May we suppose that he had by then grown unspeakably weary of the whole affair? weary of the envenomed, the quite irreconcilable Duchess, weary of the Government's carelessness and tergiversations—wearily, in fine, of one of the most prolonged, exacting and hazardous enterprises upon which a modern architect has ever been known to venture.

He was able to find relief, of course, in a number of lesser buildings—mostly country houses, some of which he altered, while some have been altered considerably since his time. Kimbolton was restored; was given, in Vanbrugh's words, "something of the castle air"; Compton Verney still presents one of his unmistakable façades; the old Clarendon Building at Oxford, next to the Sheldonian, has a semi-circular opening in the tympanum of the pediment which could only have been introduced by Vanbrugh. In speaking of the latter, however, we must not forget that Hawksmoor, to whom Sir Reginald Blomfield attributes its design, may not unimaginably have been tempted to imitate one of his master's most striking devices. Indeed, the whole work of Hawksmoor is interspersed with passages reminiscent of the haunting grandeur of Blenheim, in the building of which he was concerned during a particularly trying phase, the tower of St Mary Woolnoth, in especial, being sufficiently imbued with Vanbrugh's personality to afford Londoners

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

quite a valuable glimpse of it. But anyone who would follow this extraordinary genius in its widest range of invention, and measure its full imaginative intensity, must sooner or later undertake the journey to Woodstock, where it returned to work time after time between the distractions of lesser designs, where it is throughout most characteristically in evidence, and where, in consequence, its peculiarities (need I add?) have been most abundantly and most violently noticed.

“Ce qui entend le plus de bêtises dans le monde,” the Goncourts opine in their *Journal*, “est peut-être un tableau de musée.” Anyone who has paid the smallest attention to the shower of ridicule and vituperation which followed Vanbrugh into the ranks of the architectural profession will be inclined to cite Blenheim as an exception to that otherwise just rule. That the most persistently disagreeable figure in our literature should expend the choicest arrows of his irony upon the renegade was perhaps inevitable, but Swift’s was not the only voice raised in disapproval, and—strange, preposterous though it may seem—the acid reflections of those writers who continued in the service of literature have been marked and minted in the course of years with the stamp of undisputed authority, and still pass current in the world as pieces of authentic artistic criticism. We have all heard the adjectives “heavy,” “ugly,” “grotesque,” “Brobdignagian,” or the epithets “mausoleum,” “hollowed quarry,” “a house but not a

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

dwelling," applied to Vanbrugh's work. Since they have been uttered by such eminent men, we are still prone to say, there must after all be something in them. The Duke of Manchester, in his *Court and Society from Elizabeth to Anne*, written eighty years ago, puts forward a very legitimate explanation of this tradition of abuse. "If the public had not laughed so much at Vanbrugh's comedies," he enunciates with a good deal of justice, "the wits would probably not have sneered at his achievements in stone. . . . Vanbrugh's employment by the Queen as architect of Blenheim," the Duke adds, "crazed his enemies and detractors."

We may leave it at that. Fortunately a number of men who knew appreciably more about architecture than his rival dramatists have expressed very different opinions about Vanbrugh, and I must be allowed to quote one in particular, an architect whose genius is equal to his own, and whose critical acumen cannot be denied. It has been held until quite recently that Sir Joshua Reynolds was the first artist of eminence to say a good word for the ill-handled master. The passage in his lectures in which the latter is vindicated has been quoted so often that I must content myself with a bare reference to it. Lately, however, Mr Arthur Bolton, whose work on the Adam brothers is the only individual study on the grand scale ever vouchsafed an exponent of English architecture, has pointed out in what high esteem

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

the great Robert held the predecessor with whose buildings he was so frequently to be brought in contact. "We cannot," says Adam in the Preface to his *Works*,

"we cannot allow ourselves to close this note [on movement] without doing justice to the memory of a great man, whose reputation as an architect has been long carried down the stream by a torrent of undistinguishing prejudice and abuse. Sir John Vanbrugh's genius was of the first class; and, in point of movement, novelty and ingenuity, his works have not been exceeded by anything in modern times."

No one could call that note of praise half-hearted. In another place Mr Bolton quotes an illuminating passage from Dr Alexander Carlyle's autobiography, in which James Adam is reported to have expressed himself with the same decision but with greater particularity. "Our companion, James Adam," says Carlyle—who had been on a riding tour with him—"had seen all the splendid palaces of Italy, and though he did not say that Sir John Vanbrugh's design was faultless, yet he said it ill deserved the aspersions laid upon it, for he had seen few palaces where there was more 'movement,' as he called it, than in Blenheim."

But criticism—to use a brilliant comparison of Mr Lytton Strachey's—has long since ceased to judge its subjects as though they were criminals in a dock; the particular

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

object which an artist has set himself is to-day the first criterion by which his greatness is measured. Before we look for that quality of movement in Vanbrugh's work, therefore, we had better try whether his published correspondence will help us to extend to him the same sympathetic treatment. We shall, I think, find a valuable hint in a letter written from York to his friend Brigadier Watkin on August 26, 1721, and printed in the *Athenæum*. "Here are several gentlemen in these parts of the world," he says, "that are possess'd with the spirit of building." Does not that phrase aptly summarise the frame of mind in which Vanbrugh himself approached his art? Was there ever an architect who exhibited to a greater degree, not the economy of perfect appropriateness, not the fascinating ease of mature scholarship, but—*the spirit of building*? And what outward shape did this spirit of building assume with him? To the pursuit of what ideal did it impel him? He is "altering the house," he says in the same letter, speaking of Lumley Castle, "both for state, beauty and convenience." Those who are familiar with the general trend of the criticism that has been levelled against Vanbrugh will not be surprised to find that he himself puts convenience last in this enumeration. It is certainly true that he has sinned against convenience more than once, though not so grievously as has been represented. But beauty? Does he then put beauty foremost? No; he is principally concerned with neither beauty nor convenience,

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

but with the expression of what he calls *state*. The word is illuminating. It singles out a quality of which none of Vanbrugh's detractors would dispute his possession for one moment. Rather has it been brought against him that his buildings appear invested with a stateliness that is not legitimately theirs. But, assuming that there is a class of architecture for which the quality of stateliness is admissible, if not requisite, does not the Royal gift of Blenheim belong to that class? It may be said that Vanbrugh has treated lesser structures with as large a stroke, and to a certain extent such a criticism is reasonable. It was scarcely to be expected that the architect who began his career by planning the two most ambitious palaces in the country should be able to adjust himself instantaneously to the homely demands of very much smaller buildings. He must have found it easier to rise to the splendid occasion than it was to step down again. And yet the visitor to Blackheath may observe, at the corner of Vanbrugh Fields and Vanbrugh Park, a group of stuccoed houses of his design that are neither stately nor magnificent, but resemble the pleasant two-storied dwellings that are so much sought after in the Notting Hill district and elsewhere. That he *could* relax is evident; and many of his lesser houses attempt no more, in all fairness, than to make what he himself calls, in another letter, "a noble and masculine show." So much, at least, was not a habit acquired in his familiarity with the grandeurs of Blenheim; it was an aspiration that arose

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

from the very depths of his character, and that is never absent from his work.

We have seen Vanbrugh judged by his own standard, and found that his attainment of it has been one of the most fruitful sources of irritation against him. Let us briefly revert to that other great quality which Adam found predominant in his work—that *movement* which cannot be better defined than it has been by Sir John Soane. "A building," says the latter in one of his lectures to the Academy students, "to please must produce different sensations from each different point of view." Not all kinds of buildings are able, therefore, to exhibit this desirable quality. It is one of the misfortunes of the modern architect, for example, that the situation of his buildings very seldom admits of more than one such point of view: he is in consequence generally precluded from attempting the practice of his art in its widest and most ambitious form—from designing his works, that is to say, *in the round*. St Paul's itself, one of the glories of our national genius, is indeed a free-standing structure enjoying (in appearance) all the advantages of what is technically termed an island site: but from how many distinct points (taking no account of the housetops) can the full height of it be seen? They may be easily counted upon the fingers of one hand. Had we not five but fifty we should be in a better position to estimate its radiant, its irresistible beauty, and to make it our own. The modern street architect, however, has

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

but one point instead of five from which to design the features of his building: the result is that when a rare opportunity presents itself at the junction of two streets—or perhaps (rarest fortune!) in a structure quite surrounded by open spaces—the neglected faculty of *movement* is unequal to the task and manages but to produce a series of disconnected façades. I do not deny the essential difficulty of façade design, nor indeed the incontestable merits that are to be found in many street frontages, old and recent. But Vanbrugh's achievement is of a different kind. Walk about Blenheim in increasing or diminishing circles: observe it from as many points of vantage as you may choose—from each you will but descry a new and delectable combination of advancing and receding, of rising and subsiding masses. Everyone who has had the misfortune to grow up in a flat country will remember the delight with which he first discovered that a mountain was not, as the imagination—aided, it may be, by maps and diagrams—had been allowed to conjecture, a perfectly symmetrical protuberance rising out of the plain like a giant sugar-loaf. With what a gasp of enchantment does not the stranger dwell upon the subtle *movement* of steep and leisurely ascent, of concave and convex formation, of bare and of exquisitely clothed, and, above all, of this and that outline played in perpetual variation one against the other! It is such a feeling that Vanbrugh's architecture at its finest evokes. Perhaps he had

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

remembered some of the secrets of this truly dramatic impetus from the writing of his own plays, which exhibit the contrasts of instant and vigorous characterisation in no small degree. It is a testimony to the depth and sincerity of his genius that he was able thus to preserve its features in its application to a totally different form of utterance. But the greatest triumph of all lay in the skill with which he reconciled this force and richness of movement with the most static of all qualities. Its explanation is to be found—if anywhere—in the same utter spontaneity that made the lines of his plays trip off the actors' tongues as no mere written literature could possibly do, even when it was polished, as Congreve's plays were polished, to yield the utmost ease and fluency of sound. There may—it would not do to deny it—be but little grace of deliberation in his work; his claim to be remembered does not rest upon the exercise of a felicitous and unerring taste, but the secret springs of beauty were easy of access to his curiously limited mind, for which the dangers and the discords that would have paralysed a more discriminating can scarcely be thought to have existed.

PLATES



PLATE I. BLENHEIM. VIEW FROM THE SOUTH-WEST.



PLATE 2. BLENHEIM. ENTRANCE FRONT.



PLATE 3. BLENHEIM. MAIN ENTRANCE.

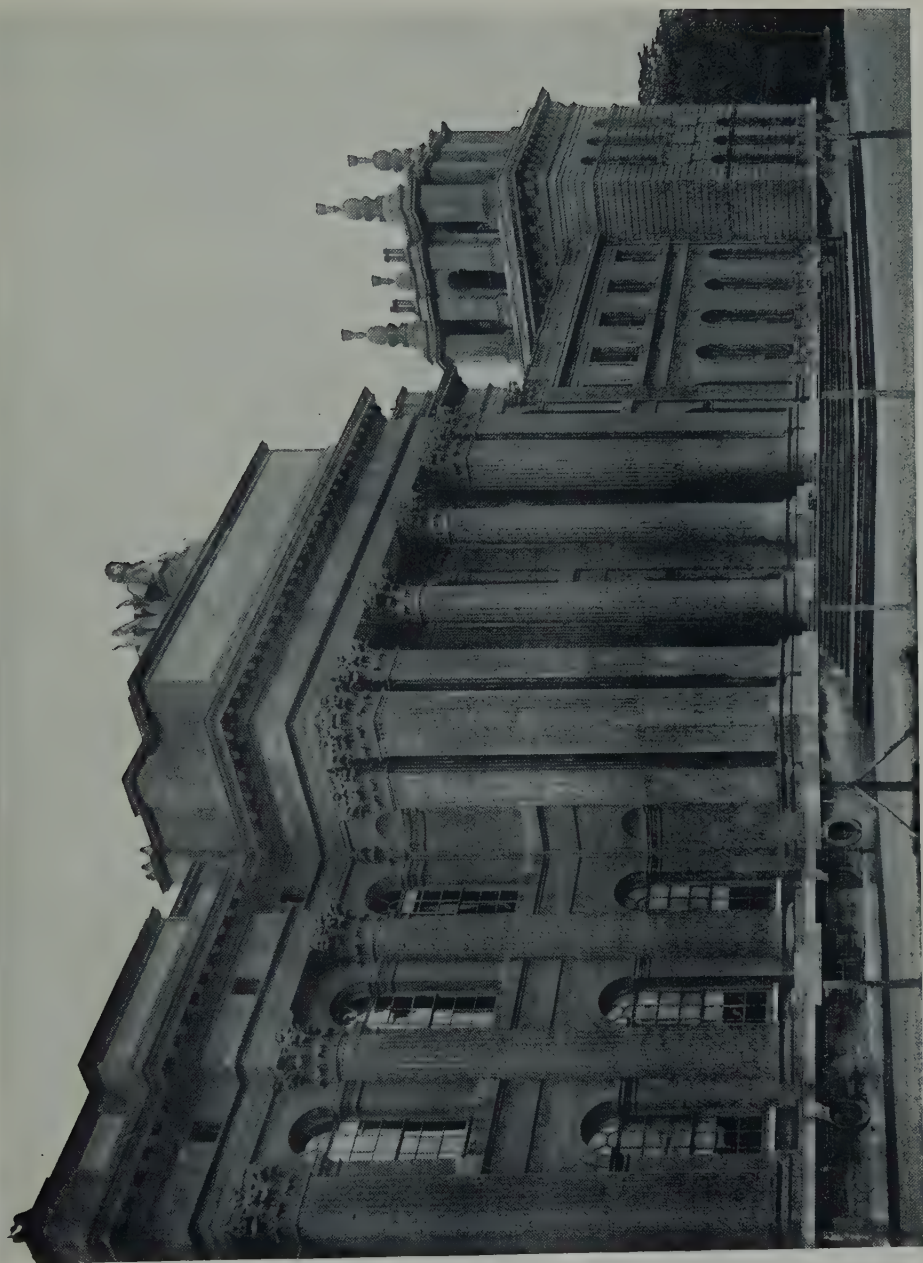


PLATE 4. BLENHEIM. GARDEN FRONT.

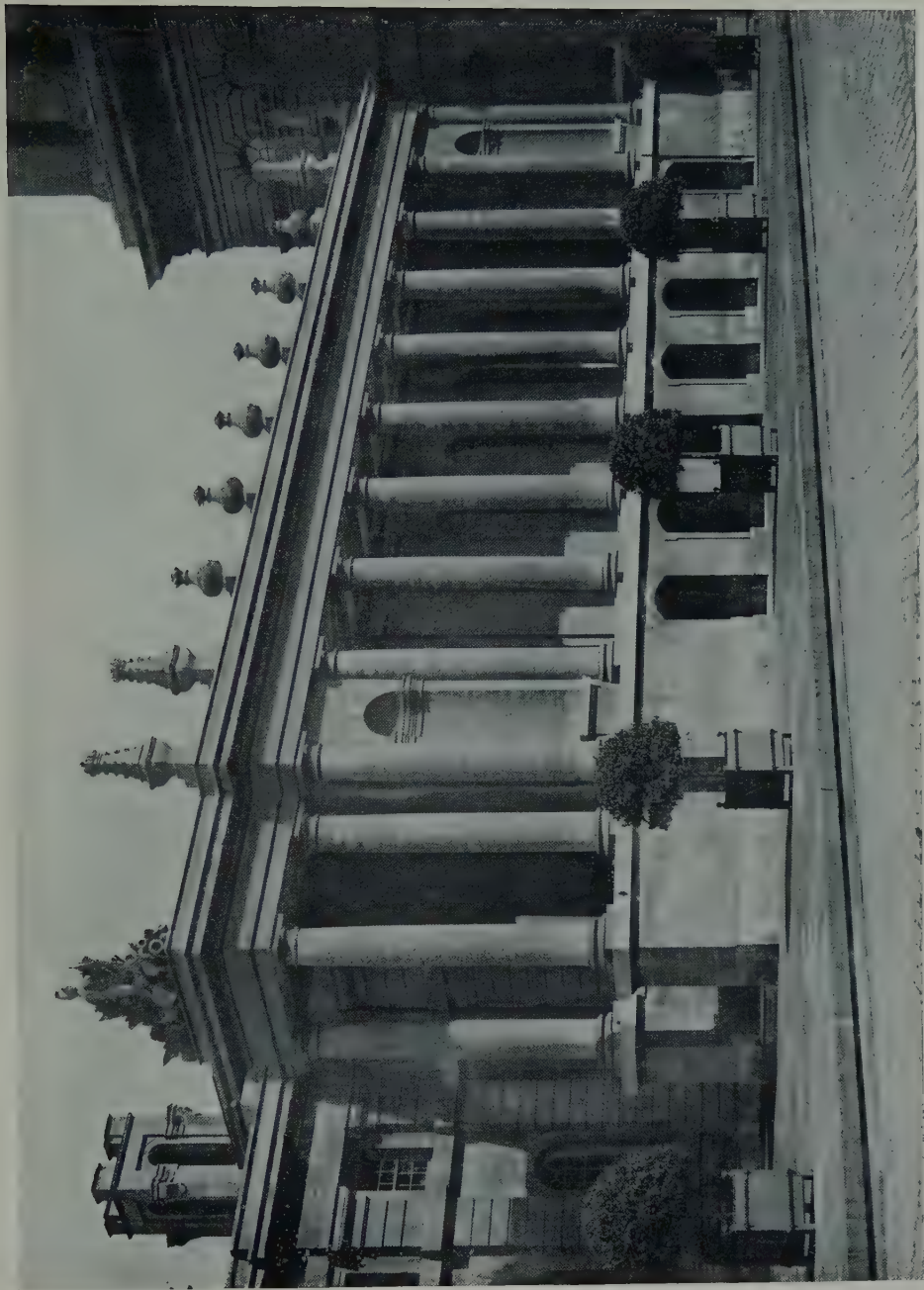


PLATE 5. BLENHEIM. DETAIL OF COLONNADE. ENTRANCE FRONT.

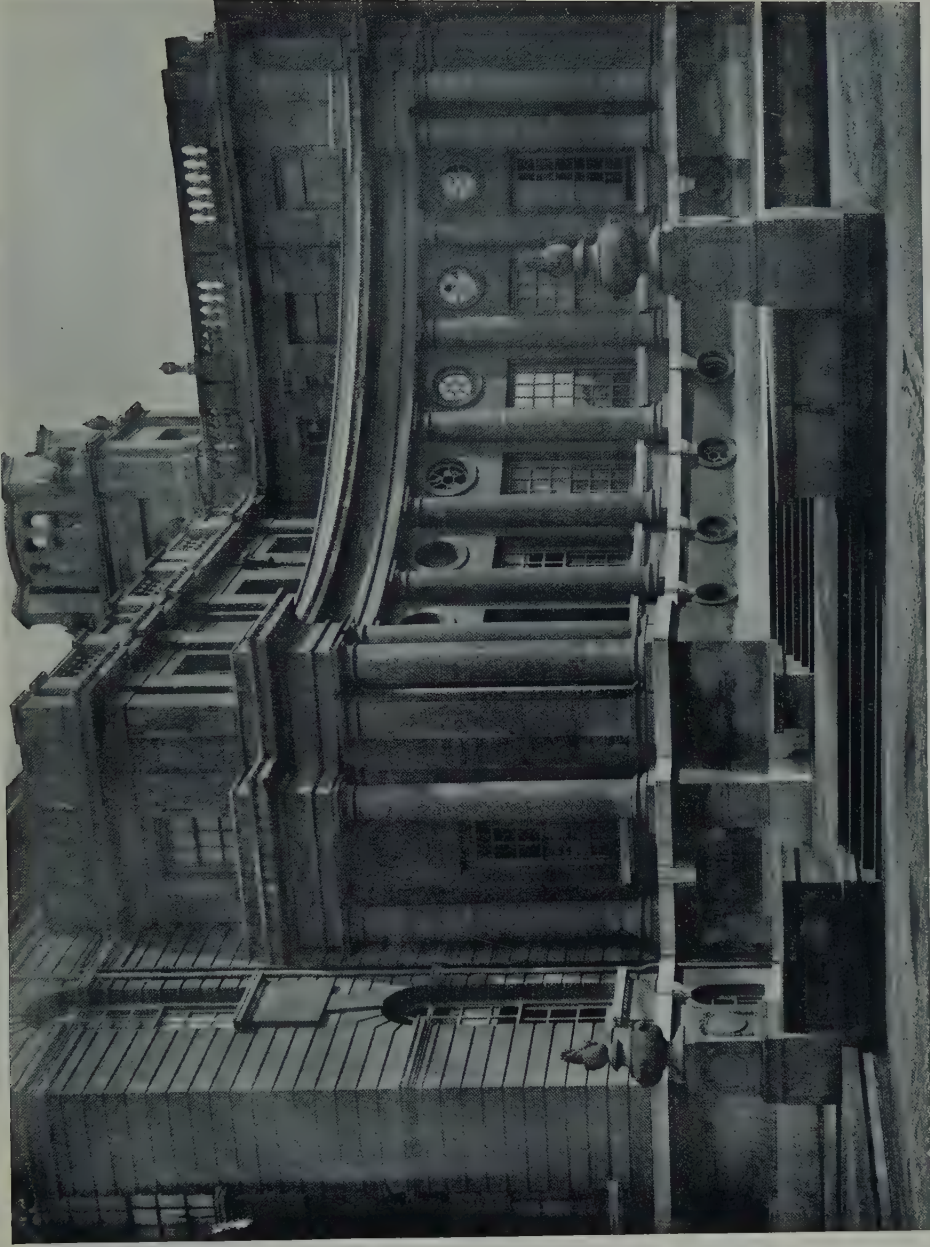


PLATE 6. BLENHEIM. DETAIL OF ENTRANCE FRONT.

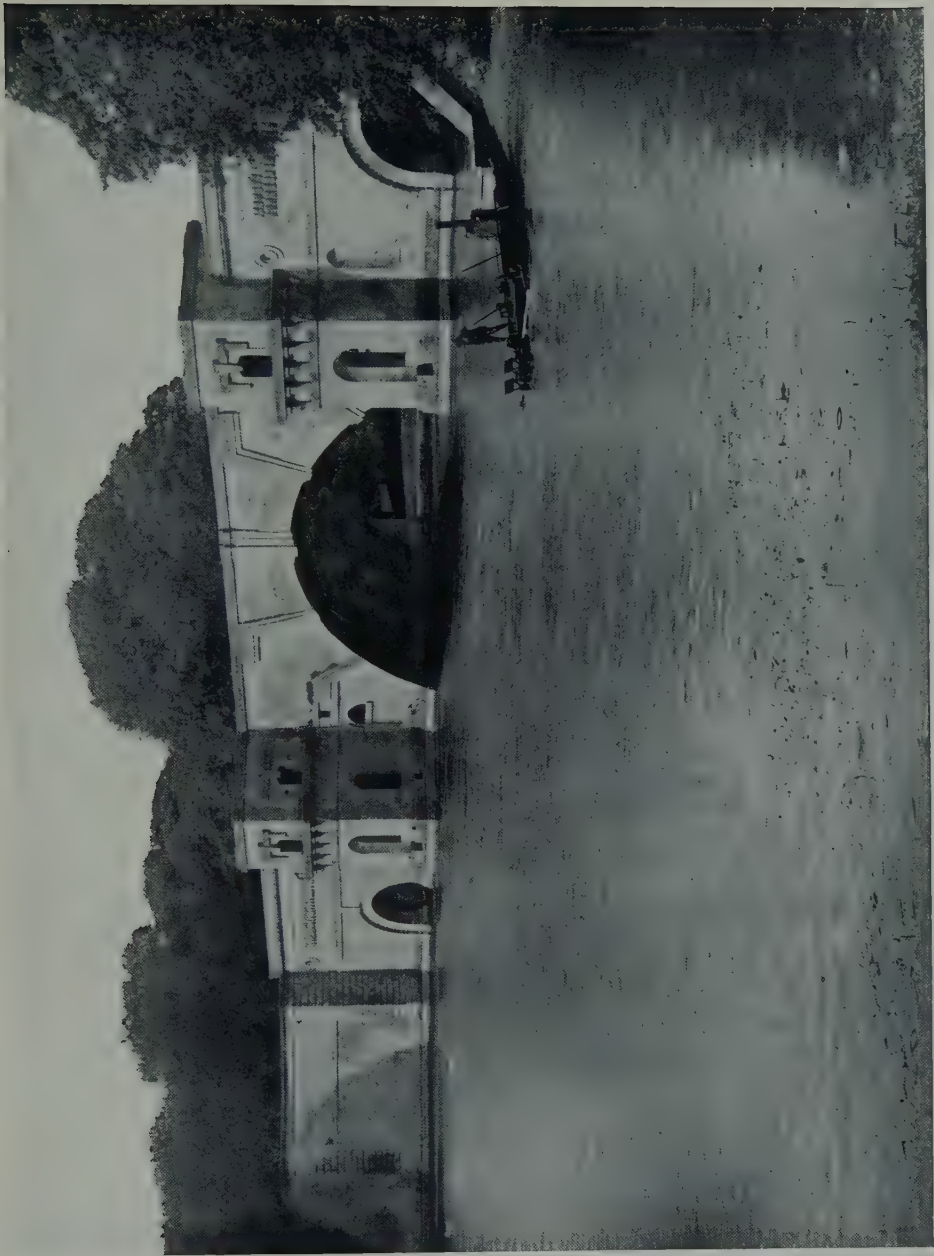


PLATE 7. BLENHEIM. BRIDGE IN PARK.



PLATE 8. BLENHEIM. DETAIL OF INNER COURTYARD.



PLATE 9. BLENHEIM. DETAIL OF ENTRANCE FRONT.

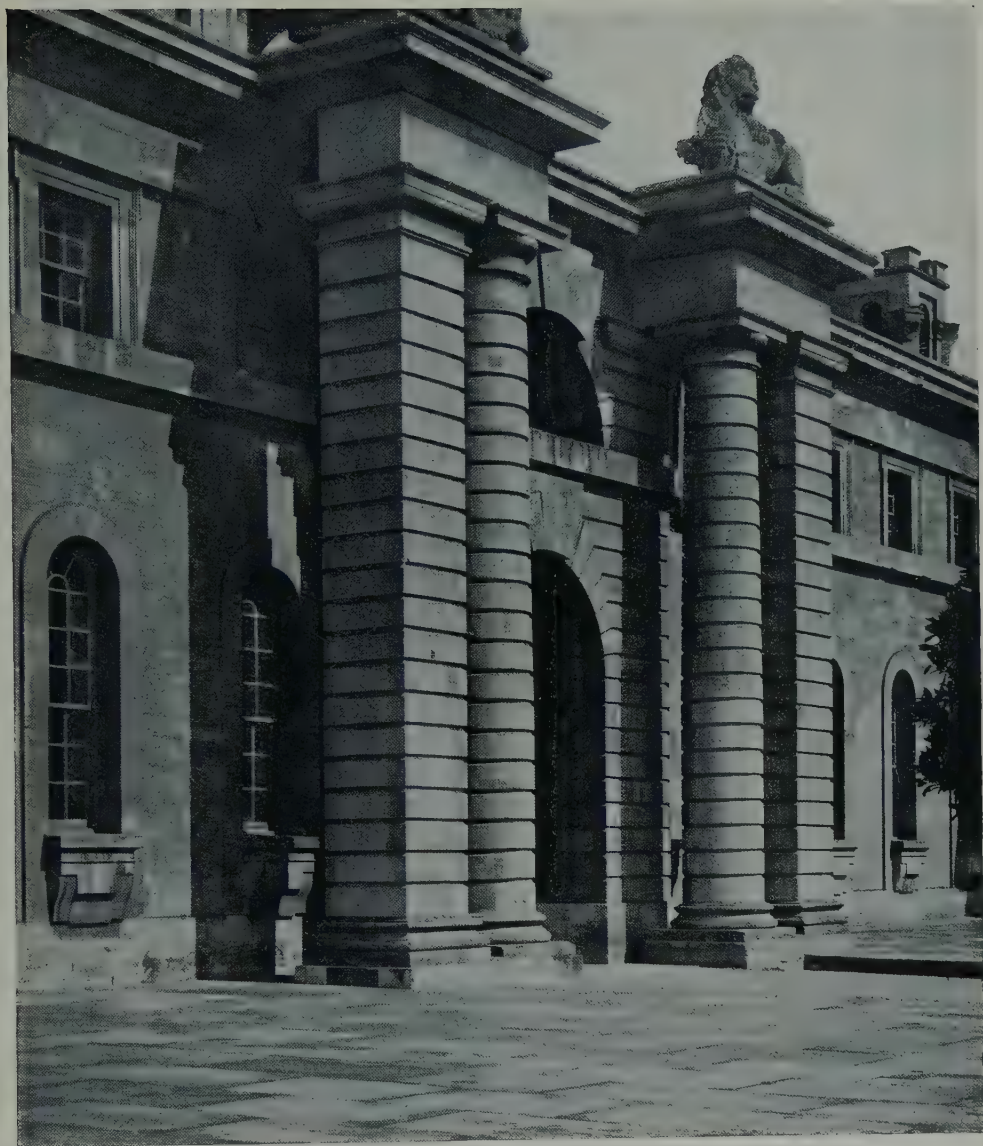


PLATE 10. BLENHEIM. ENTRANCE TO COURTYARD.



PLATE II. BLENHEIM. LIBRARY.



PLATE 12. BLENHEIM. THE CORRIDOR.



PLATE 13. BLENHEIM. DOORWAY IN LIBRARY.



PLATE 14. BLENHEIM. MAIN STAIRCASE.



PLATE 15. BLENHEIM. VIEW OF GREAT HALL.



PLATE 16. BLENHEIM. THE GREAT HALL.



PLATE 17. SEATON DELAVAL. MAIN FRONT.



PLATE 18. SEATON DELAVAL. GENERAL VIEW.

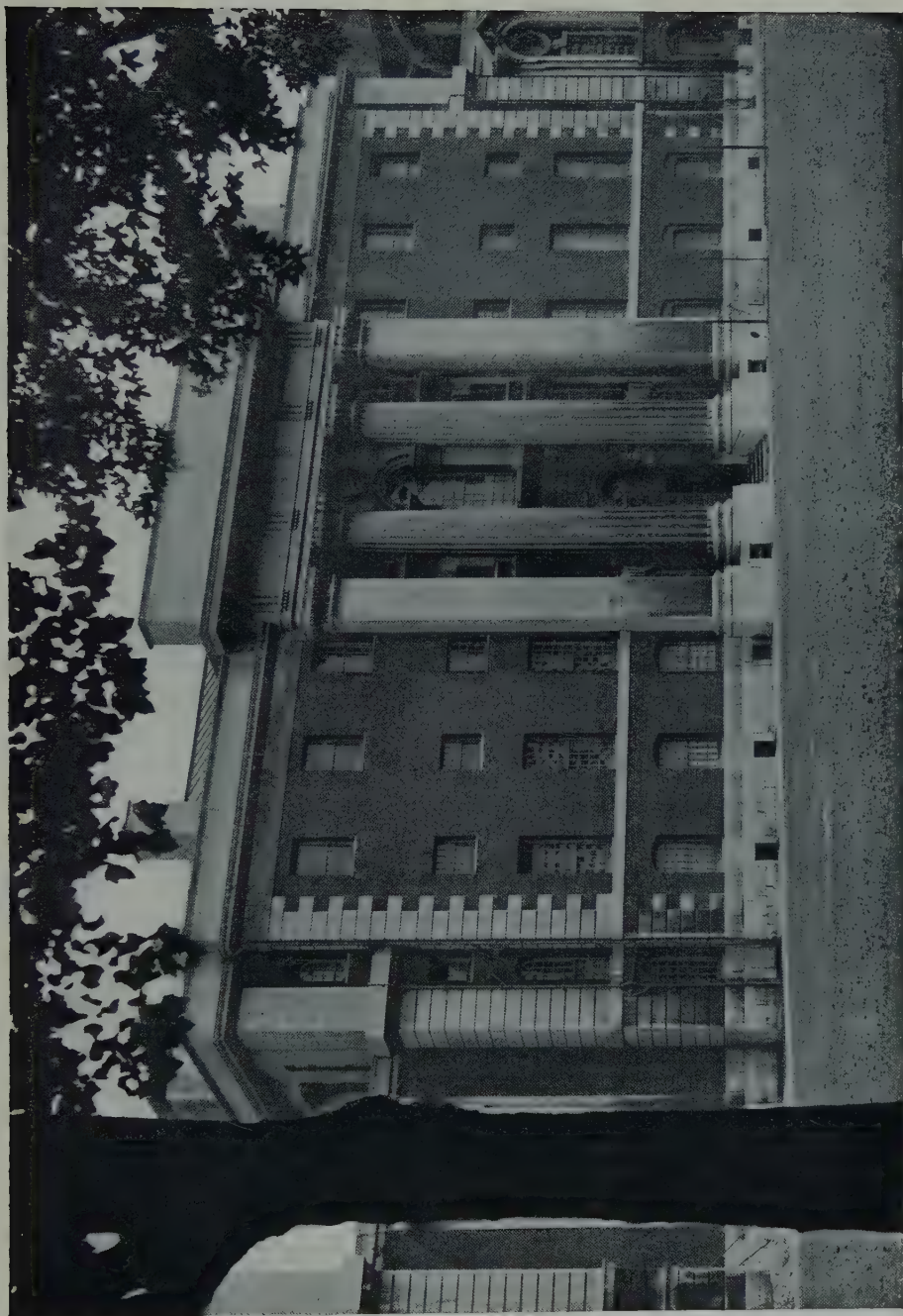


PLATE 19. GREENWICH HOSPITAL. ADDITION BY VANBRUGH.



PLATE 20. GREENWICH HOSPITAL. DETAIL.

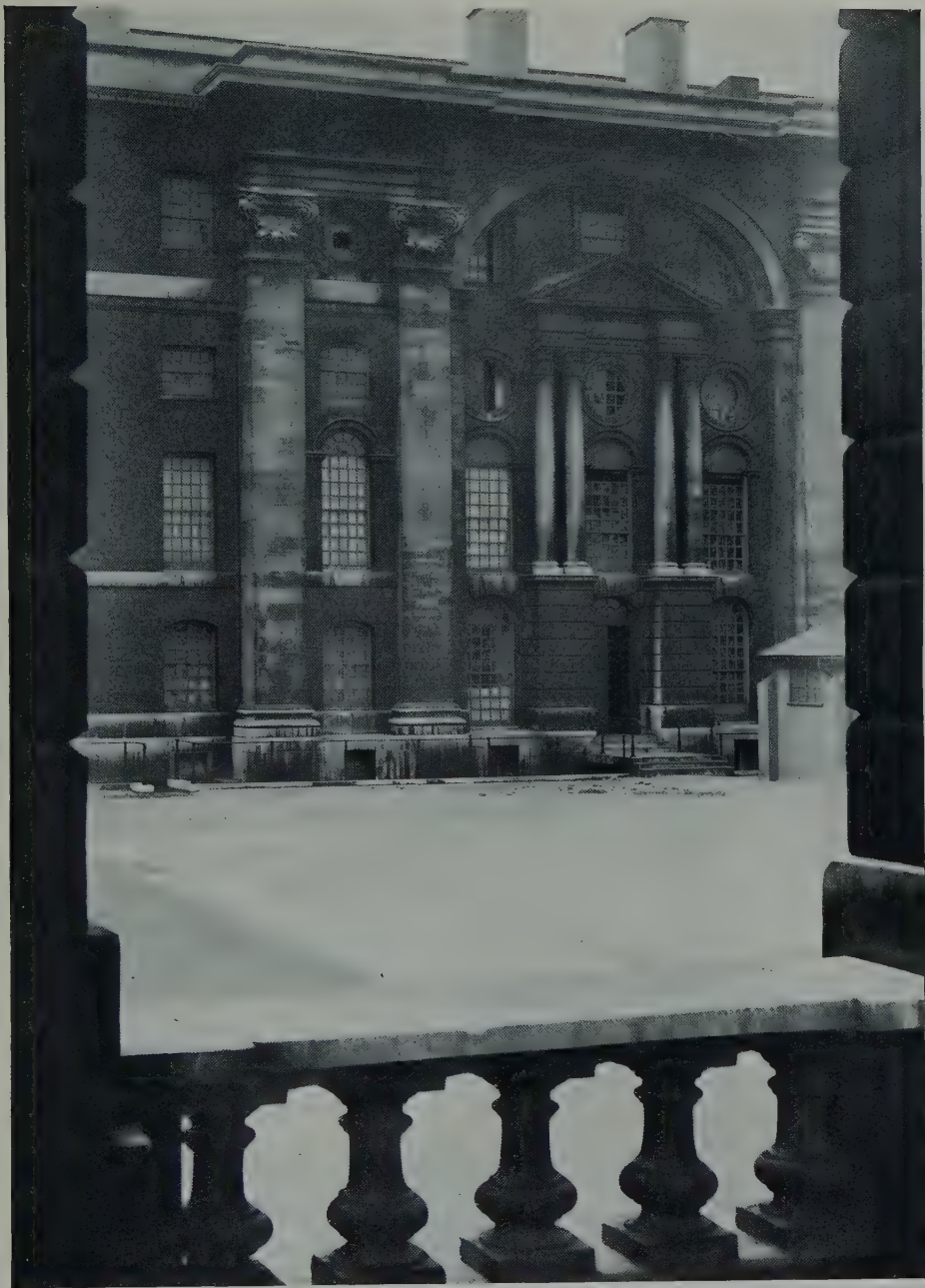


PLATE 21. GREENWICH HOSPITAL. DETAIL.



PLATE 22. VANBRUGH CASTLE. BLACKHEATH.



(a) DUNCOMBE PARK.



(b) DUNCOMBE PARK. THE STABLES.

PLATE 23.



PLATE 24. CASTLE HOWARD, GENERAL VIEW FROM THE GARDENS.



PLATE 25. CASTLE HOWARD. DETAIL OF WING.



PLATE 26. CASTLE HOWARD, GENERAL VIEW.



PLATE 27. CASTLE HOWARD, THE PAVILION.

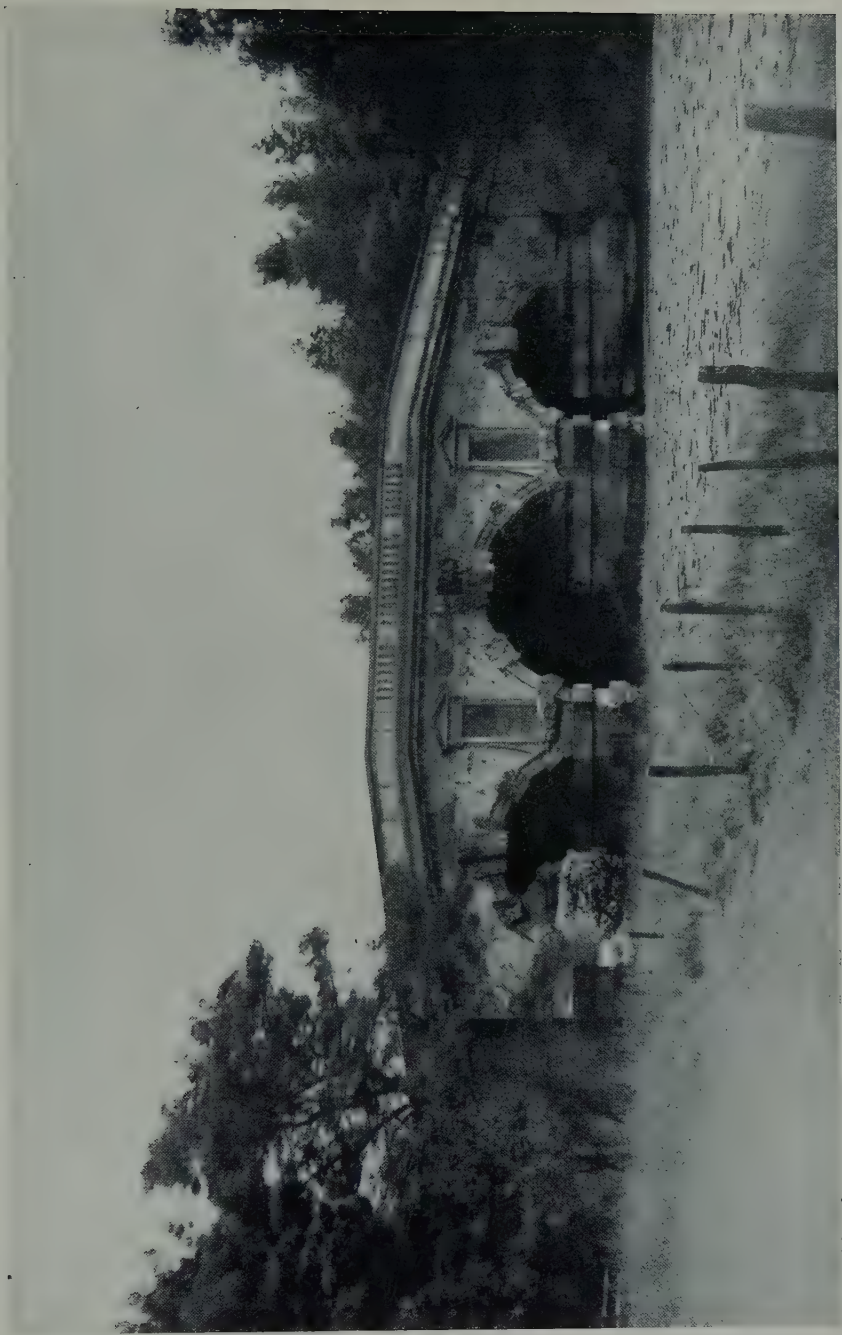


PLATE 28. CASTLE HOWARD. BRIDGE IN GROUNDS.



PLATE 29. CASTLE HOWARD. DETAIL OF ENTRANCE FRONT.

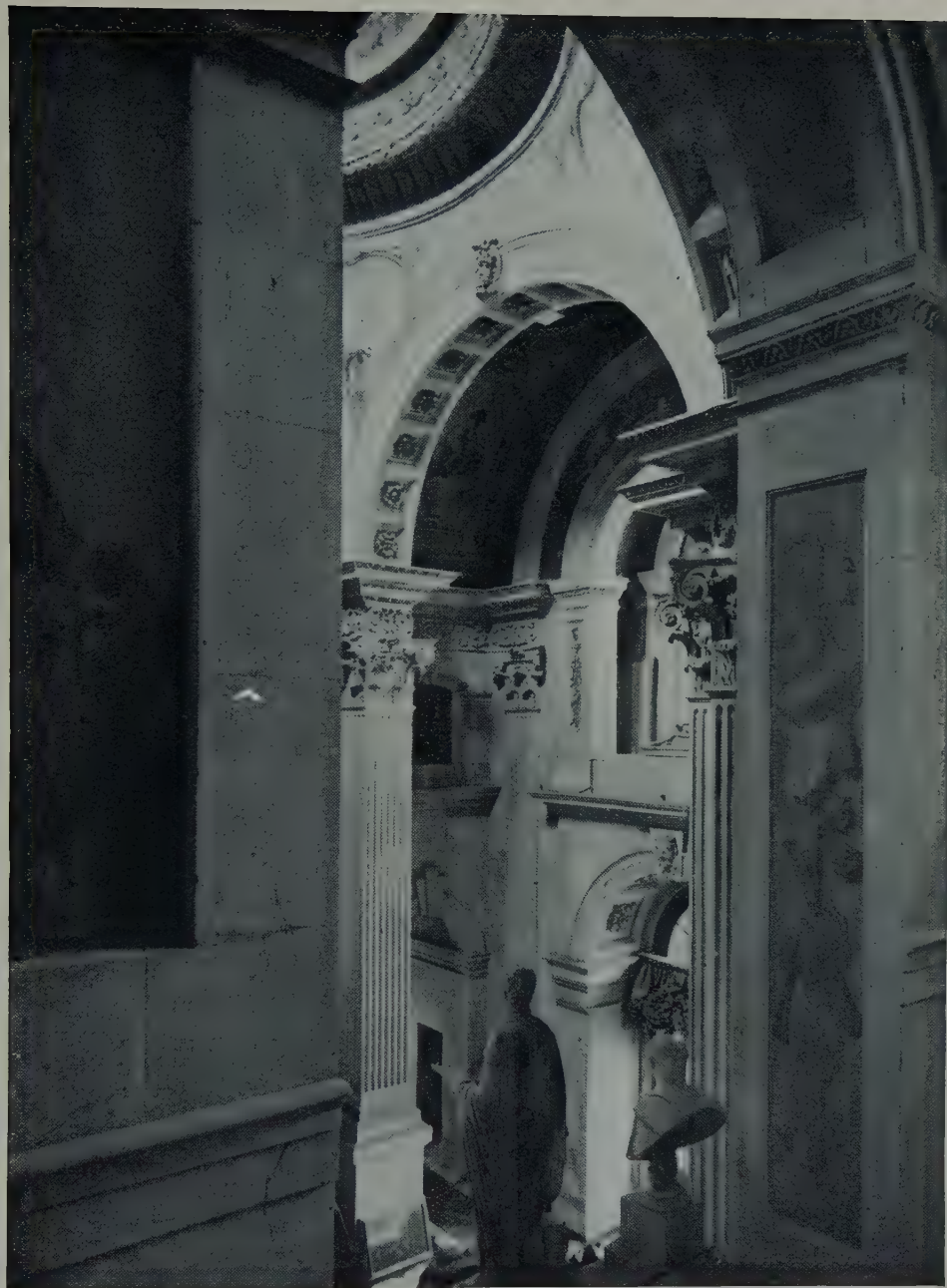


PLATE 30. CASTLE HOWARD. VIEW FROM THE STAIRCASE
LOOKING INTO THE GREAT HALL.



PLATE 31. CASTLE HOWARD. FIREPLACE IN GREAT HALL.



PLATE 32. CASTLE HOWARD. THE GREAT HALL.

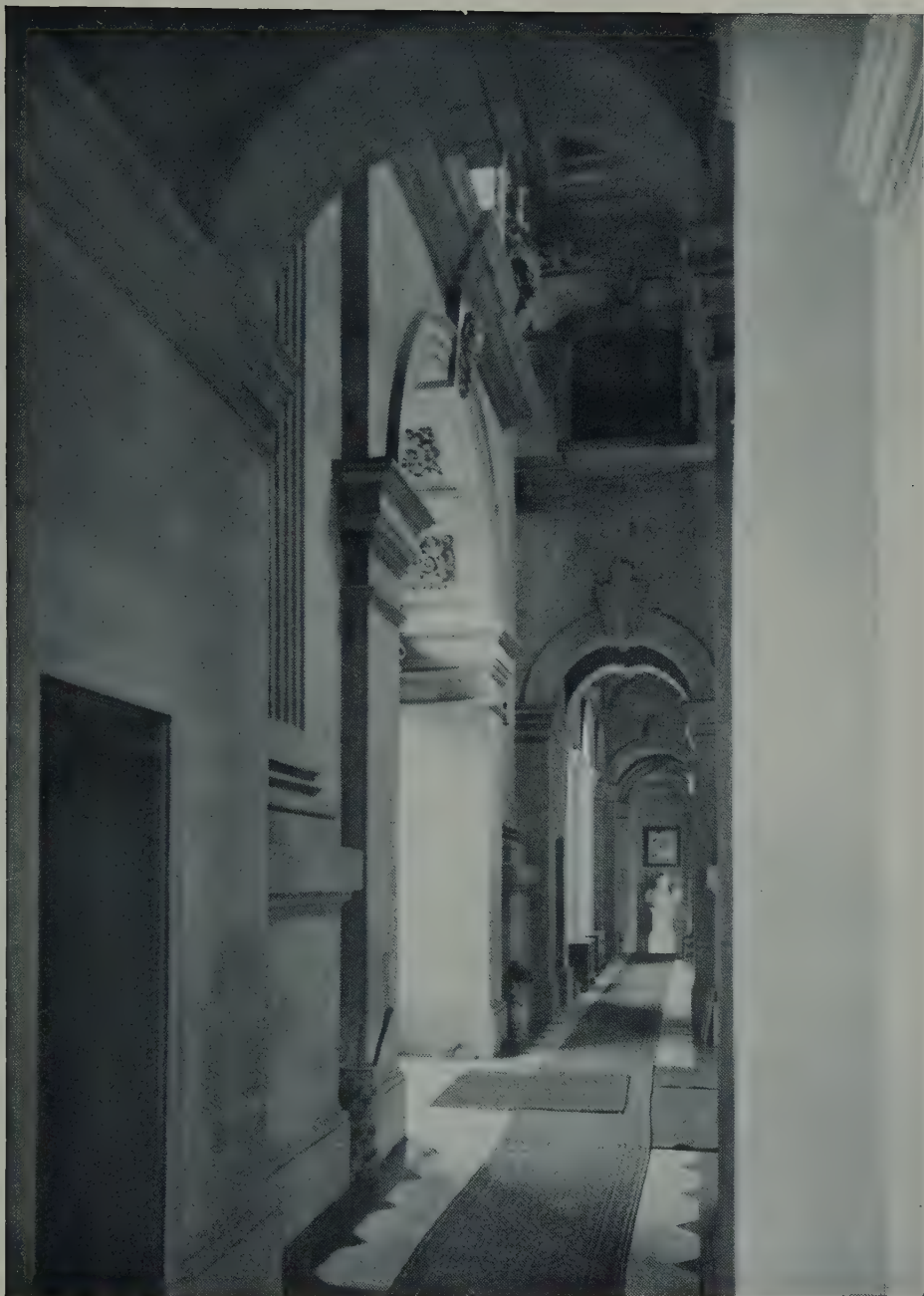
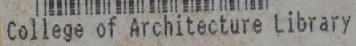


PLATE 33. CASTLE HOWARD. THE CORRIDOR.

14441

NA997.V3.B3 1924



MY 24 '68			
DE 18 '92			
GAYLORD			PRINTED IN U.S.A.

GAYLORD

PRINTED IN U.S.A.



3 9001 03156 0405

BARMAN, CHRISTIAN

AUTHOR

SIR JOHN VANBRUGH

TITLE

